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SUBJECT: COLOMBIA CONFLICT UPDATE FOR APRIL - JUNE 2008

REF: A. BOGOTA 1895 B. BOGOTA 2266

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (S) In the second quarter of 2008, FARC leader Manuel Maralunda ("Tirofijo") died, notorious FARC commander Nelly Avila Moreno ("Karina") deserted, and the military rescued three American hostages, Ingrid Betancourt and eleven others. These successes further demoralized the morale of FARC rank-and-file morale, leading to increased desertions. The military focused its efforts on attacking FARC concentrated in Meta, Tolima and Valle de Cauca departments. Colombian National Police (CNP) say the FARC's urban terrorist capabilities are weak, but the Colombian military noted that 350 FARC fighters moved into Cundinamarca department south of Bogota. FARC collaboration with new narco groups increased in Meta, as well as the north and Pacific Coasts. End Summary.

"OPERATION JAQUE"

¶2. (S) On July 2, the three American hostages and Ingrid Betancourt were rescued in an unprecedented Colombian military intelligence operation (Operation Jaque or Operation Check.) The operation's success rested on the military's ability to utilize actionable intelligence received from deserters, exploit the lack of communications between FARC fronts and senior commanders due to their fear of detection, and maintain military pressure on FARC Secretariat member Mono Jojoy and his Eastern Block in the Macarena region. The operation will likely further demoralize FARC rank and file, leading to more desertions. Reporting indicates FARC leaders are considering their next step: likely either a further pull back to regroup, or a decision to lash out with terrorist attacks to regain the initiative.

DESERTIONS CONTINUE TO RISE

¶3. (S) The death of long-time FARC leader Manuel Maralunda ("Tirofijo") in late March--as well as the desertion of notorious FARC commander Nelly Avila Moreno (Karina) following the deaths of Raul Reyes and Ivan Rios in March 2008--put increased pressure on FARC leaders and

organization. Security analyst Alfredo Rangel told us FARC leaders have lost control over many fronts, leading to increased desertions from the 16th, 39th, 47th, 27th, 49th, 32nd, 35th and 37th FARC fronts. Over the reporting period, the number of desertions was the highest in recent cycles--climbing from 189 in Q1'08 to 420 in Q2'08. The majority of the desertions occurred in southern Antioquia/Caldas/Risaralda and Meta/Vichada. Many deserters had 10-20 years with the FARC, and were mid-level commanders.

COLOMBIAN MILITARY FOCUS

¶4. (S) The head of Colombian Military Operations (J3) General Carlos Saavedra told us the FARC lacks the ability to destabilize the country, but retains the capacity to inflict harm. The Colombian military dealt the FARC several blows during the first six months of 2008, but the group can quickly regenerate and rearm due to narcotrafficking profits. Saavedra added that despite the military's successes, he doubts the FARC will disintegrate into small narco bands or lose its political focus.

¶5. (S) Saavedra said the Colombian military is focused on ensuring security, mobility and tactical surprise in two key FARC regions: 1) an area stretching from Norte de Santander to Choco, and 2) an area extending from Meta department west into Valle de Cauca department. The military would like to attack both areas at once, but Saavedra told us the it lacks the capacity to do so. Saavedra said the military has opted to focus on the Meta-Valle region, and would move the Joint Forces Decisive Action Unit (FUCAD) from Montes de Maria in the north to Tolima in the coming months. In the JTF-Omega area of operations in Meta, the military will try to maintain the pressure on Mono Jojoy. Saavedra hopes to add additional mobile brigades to JTF-Omega forces, but is unsure where he will draw the troops from.

FARC TACTICS - URBAN AREAS, INFRASTRUCTURE, IEDs

¶6. (S) CNP Bogota Commander General Rodolfo Palomino told us the FARC does not have urban fronts capable of carrying out major attacks in Bogota. The Colombian military largely drove the FARC out of Cundinamarca in 2003, a success which has undermined its urban capabilities. In May/June 2008, four bombings occurred in Bogota in a two week period, but Palomino told us it was unlikely that any were conducted by the FARC (see ref B). At the same time, Colombian security forces' seizures of explosives, improvised explosive devices, and mines rose sharply in Cundinamarca, Meta, Caqueta, Cauca and Valle. (Comment: There have been several bombings in urban areas in July and August, but it is not clear that these represent improved FARC urban terrorist capabilities. See septel.)

¶7. (S) Saavedra said the Colombian military has detected the movement of at least 350 FARC fighters into southern Cundinamarca (the department which surrounds Bogota) via Tolima and Meta, but it remains unclear if this is aimed at rebuilding FARC presence in this region or is the result of FARC units fleeing security forces pressure on traditional FARC strongholds. IEDs and road-side bombs killed fourteen soldiers and wounded thirty-one in Valle, Tolima and Narino. Ten attacks on pipelines and other infrastructure took place in Tolima, Narino and La Guajira.

NEIGHBORLY INVOLVEMENT

¶8. (S) There was little military activity reported along Ecuador and Venezuela borders, but reports of weapons manufactured in neighboring countries and transported into Colombia rose, especially from Ecuador, Nicaragua and Venezuela. There were no reports of overt material support from Venezuela or Ecuador, but low- to mid-level military contacts with the FARC continued. In June, a Venezuelan sergeant major was captured in Puerto Inirida, Guainia,

transporting weapons and 40,000 rounds of AK-47 ammunition over the border to FARC contacts.

FARC - CRIMINAL GROUP COLLABORATION

19. (S) Limited ties between the FARC and some new criminal groups continued to grow. The local OAS Mission in Support of Peace (MAPP/OAS) told us FARC fronts were forming limited alliances with criminal groups along the north coast after the Colombian military destroyed the FARC 35th and 37th fronts. Similarly, narcotrafficker Pedro Olivero Guerrero (Cuchillo) and John 40, leader of the FARC 43rd Front, were cooperating on drug transactions in Meta. The CNP, MAPP/OEA, and the UN reported links between the FARC and new criminal groups near the Panamanian border, while the "Aguilas Negras" of Southern Bolivar are reportedly collaborating with the FARC 24th Front in southern Bolivar. A FARC fighter with 12 years of experience told daily El Tiempo, "the FARC are creating these alliances to establish pacts with narco groups to manage the cultivation of coca, protect laboratories, and transport routes."

BROWNFIELD